

"EL CORRIDO DE GREGORIO CORTEZ."

A corrido, or ballad, is a form of folk song used to tell a story. Typically, corridos are highly stylized and often romantic ballads that celebrate Hispanic history and culture along the Texas–Mexico border. The earliest border corrido can be traced to Juan Nepomuceno Cortina. Cortina became the first border Mexican hero when he shot an American marshal in the late 1850s for mistreating one of his mother's young servants. This incident led to an open conflict with American authorities. Cortina's actions helped spark a long series of border conflicts, involving legal, political, and cultural clashes between Mexicans and Americans living on both sides of the border. It was during the time of Cortina's revolt that the first such ballads were heard, thereby setting the general pattern of the border corrido. The subject matter of this genre ordinarily involved a Mexican, usually outnumbered, defending his right with a pistol in hand against the evil ranches (Texas Rangers).

Probably the best-known corrido of the entire turn-of-the-century period is "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez." Although this ballad celebrates an event that occurred a century ago, it is still very popular among Spanish-speaking people throughout the American Southwest and northern Mexico. Typical of ballads in all societies, "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" is based on fact, but it also has been richly embellished. The event that inspired it occurred on June 12, 1901, in Karnes County, at the W.A. Thulmeyer Ranch. Gregorio Cortez and his brother Romaldo, who worked as ranch hands on the Thulmeyer property, were approached by Karnes County sheriff W. T. Morris and his deputies John Trimmell and Boone Choate. The sheriff and his men went to the ranch to look for a horse thief who had been trailed to Karnes County. As the sheriff interrogated the Cortez brothers, Choate, who acted as interpreter, apparently misunderstood several of Gregorio Cortez's replies. For example, when asked if he had recently traded a horse, Cortez replied "no." Choate seemed unaware that, in Spanish, there is a distinction between a horse (caballo) and a mare (yegua). Cortez, in fact, had traded a mare but not a horse.

As the misunderstanding escalated, the sheriff became convinced that Cortez was lying. When Morris tried to arrest the brothers, Gregorio refused, telling the sheriff, "No me puede arrestar por nada" (You can not arrest me for nothing). Choate misinterpreted this statement as well and reported to Morris that Cortez was saying, "No white man can arrest me." Believing the Cortez brothers were unarmed, Morris drew his gun. Romaldo tried to protect his brother by lunging at the sheriff. Morris shot and wounded Romaldo and then fired at Gregorio, narrowly missing him. Cortez immediately shot and killed the sheriff. Cortez fled the scene and headed for the Rio Grande. He was soon pursued by hundreds of men, including several Texas Rangers. He was able to evade his pursuers for several days but eventually was captured after one of his acquaintances, Jesus "El Teco" González, informed a posse that Cortez was hiding at Abrán de la Garza's sheep camp in Cotulla. On June 22, 1901, Cortez was arrested and taken to San Antonio.

The Cortez incident quickly came to symbolize the ongoing border conflicts, and the ballad that it inspired helped establish the Mexican corrido as a means of expressing racial and cultural tensions along the border. As Cortez eluded his captors, they only grew more determined to capture and punish him. However, Cortez also gained a huge following of supporters, especially from within the Hispanic population, many of whom began to view him as a hero. Those who admired him pointed to the fact that, on the run, he had walked nearly 100 miles and ridden more than 400, while being pursued by search parties of up to 300 men. By the time of his arrest, Cortez had killed two sheriffs and evaded capture by numerous posses. Most of his supporters feared that he would not receive a fair trial. He was sentenced to life in prison. However, when he eventually won early release, many of his admirers saw this as the final triumph of justice. Because of his remarkable ability to prevail against great odds, Cortez came to be seen as an almost mythic symbol of heroism to many Hispanic people in Texas and Mexico. His heroic exploits and his triumph over a legal system that seemed biased against Mexican Americans have been celebrated for decades through "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez."

Numerous ballads have derived from the original corrido. It was these different variants that were responsible for the growth of Cortez's image as a folk hero. It is widely believed that the original version of the Cortez corrido was written as the drama was unfolding by an unknown guitarrero who performed the ballad in various cantinas along the border. Soon after Cortez's capture, other variations of the corrido appeared. Some of the earliest expressed the concern that Cortez would never be given a fair hearing:

Between Cortez's capture and his sentencing, from 1901 to 1905, the corrido grew increasingly popular and could be heard on ranches, in bars, and at public gatherings throughout the Southwest. In at least a few cases along the Texas side of the border, singers sometimes were arrested, beaten, or even lost their jobs if they performed it in public.

The corrido was sung in different variations and in different areas for distinct reasons. Nevertheless, the Cortez case united Mexicans and Mexican Americans in a common cause that caught attention as far away as Mexico City, where a broadside ballad of Cortez was used to collect funds for his defense. Through the corrido, Cortez ostensibly was able to appeal directly to the audience for contributions. Along the border and in Texas, however, there is no evidence that the ballad was used to collect funds. For the most part, the border corrido focused more on Cortez and his deeds and less on trying to resolve a seemingly hopeless situation. Many Mexican Americans saw Cortez as the kind of hero they needed.

Cortez entered the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville on January 1, 1905, to begin serving his life sentence. After his imprisonment, the ballad soon fell into the category of old corridos about past

events. Not until his release from prison in 1913 was "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" revived. This was the time of the Mexican Revolution, and, with Cortez's release, the ballad generated immediate interest, especially along the lower border, where there was a demand for such heroic themes. In numerous ways, Cortez personified the spirit of the border strife. Over the next few years, the original corrido continued to evolve and be reinterpreted into countless versions. By the 1920s, details had become less important, and the focus was directed more toward the general story of Cortez. During the 1940s the corrido continued to be a favorite among Mexican guitarreros and the Spanish-speaking public. In 1958 historian Américo Paredes examined the legend of Gregorio Cortez in a book, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. This study helped to popularize the story again among the Mexican-American population and to reintroduce Cortez to the Anglo-American public, thereby stirring up some old controversies. A former Texas Ranger even threatened Paredes and claimed that he wanted to "pistol whip the son-of-a-bitch who wrote that book." In 1982 Hollywood made a movie entitled *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*. The Cortez corrido can still be considered the prototype of the border-conflict ballad.

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